Are You Talented?

Are you talented? How much talent do you have? Is it enough? These are important and difficult questions for a musician. Talent is so very important, so crucial to success, and yet, we normally assume the endowment to be immutable. It's terrifying.

We want to believe that we have talent, but we're all afraid to find out that we don't have enough talent to do what we'd like, when likely there is nothing we can do about it. Tough bananas!

But what is talent anyway? Specifically, today, what is musical talent for a performer? Well, it would certainly be everything that could make someone a better player, every little change of psychology or physiology that would make him more ideal for the task; fingers shaped just so, the cartilage of the ears cupped in the proper manner, exceptional concentration, long flowing hair… So musical talent could be lots of things, so many things that it would be difficult to establish a complete list. Some things, though, would matter more than others, a lot more. So, maybe it would be better to ask 'what are the key elements of musical talent for a performer?' and then, 'how much of these things do we have?' and finally 'would it be possible for you to get more?'

I'd propose that to answer those questions one would need to know how things work. One would need to understand the essential functions of a music machine, to know exactly what's happening, or what should be happening. Then, seeing how a machine works, or sometimes doesn't work, one could conceptualize a perfect machine, make the blueprints for an idealized mechanism that would perform the essential functions of music making with flawless consistency. This machine, once planned, could be a guide, a north star, a compass. Everyone of us would have it in pocket, a ready map to improvement. And, it might help us know how close we are already: it might be able to tell us if we have talent.

But how in the world could we conceptualize such a machine? Where would we start? Well, since we must start somewhere, let's begin on the outside, with some observation. Let's be scientists.

First, we must choose some subjects for observation, then we must get good samples from all subjects recording it faithfully and accurately, and finally we must evaluate our data, seeking patterns and trends. No bias! So, let's have some young players, some old players and some in between. A good mix of mature and beginner, world-class and unbearable. Let's have some boys and some girls, some fat and some thin, rich and poor, tall and short, and for good measure throw in a red head. Let's watch them play.

What did we see? When we graph our observations and run statistical analyses, what characteristics seem to correlate well? Are the thumbs better placed? Do the better players sit up better or stand up straighter? Maybe the better players are always on the tips of their fingers, or

begin every movement from the shoulder. Perhaps it's some kind of hardly-definable thing like 'balance.'

You check your sample and I'll check mine.

Nope. None of that bears out at all. In fact, a lot of the really great players have highly idiosyncratic ways of physically addressing the instrument. No two are the same, and it's easy to find world-class musicians doing things that no good teacher would allow. No one is taught to sit like Gould, or to use Ma's bow hold. It's not that there are no great players who exhibit 'text-book' technique, because there are some, but they're hardly a majority, and they don't seem to be any better than those who play weirdly. In fact, it's often the other way around.

So what can we learn from our observation? It seems there are two possibilities, either it's just fine, or even, better, to play in an idiosyncratic way (celebrate the unconventional, fire your teacher, burn the etudes!), or the things we were observing were not things of great importance. We weren't viewing the machine's essential functions. They live somewhere else, somewhere deeper, harder to find. Let's seek them.

To do that we should probably quit being scientists for a bit. It's very proper to be a scientist these days. Scientists know everything, they're solving all of our problems, and one absolutely cannot, on penalty of cruelest ridicule and humiliation, disagree with a scientist. But, even though a deeper scientific approach could be taken here, the results wouldn't likely be helpful. (So what if we know what brain scans of virtuosos look like compared to amateurs? What exactly does that tell us? What are you going to do about it?)

Instead, I'll have us reborn as philosophers, less revered these days but not actually so different from scientists of yore. I'll have us think about music. Have us examine the nature of it through reflection and logic, turn it about in our minds seeking comprehension, following the trail of logic.

We must then start with music. It is the stuff, the substance processed by the music machine, and to idealize a machine perfectly constructed to process that substance we must first understand the substance itself.

For this purpose music is probably best conceived of as a language, since it does language things, and that's mostly how we use it. It communicates mental experience from person to person through a medium, here sound. A mental experience encoded on the sending side by a composer, then performer (perhaps performers), and decoded on the receiving side by listeners. One could argue whether the sound itself is the music or if it is that which is being communicated by the sound, but it would be difficult to establish that the communicated substance could remain intact when divorced from the sound. More likely such a division would, in fact, be destruction. So they must remain unified, this sound with the meaning it caries, and together make up what we call music.

So this sound/meaning amalgam is music. It is much the same as other languages, but differs in that the sounds carry no literal meaning. A language of nearly pure syntax, no semantics. A special language ideally suited to carry certain types of mental experience, the sounds of which can deliver the feeling of being human, with all its beauty, tragedy, love, hope, despair, passion, and even quiet thoughtfulness or logic. It is, however, a terrible language for telling others where to find the bathroom. For that, there are better languages, like Finnish or Esperanto.

It is for the music language we must devise an ideal processing machine, one that perfectly sends and receives messages, no distortion or simplification, only true and clear transformation of experience to sound or sound to experience. Let's imagine:

Such a machine would first hear every detail of sound, every variation of pitch, every click of bow change, every waiver of tone. It would pick up the relationships of these sounds over time as well, how quickly one follows another, and even 'hear' the silence when sound vacates. The machine must do this without distorting the sounds, wishing for them to be different than they are or filling in the blanks. Attentive and faithful to every detail, no matter how small, the machine has a supreme sound consciousness.

It is not enough, however, for this perfect machine to hear every sound, it must also respond to the sounds, it needs to decode the meaning. Your reel-to-reel equipped with a 77-DX can pick up every sound, but it doesn't understand music any better than your sofa cooks fish. To understand is more than to hear. So, how can our machine understand? How can it decode?

It must be human. If the meaning of the sound is the mental experience of a human in response to it, then it can only be decoded by a human. Sure, we could try to somehow describe the experience in another language, but it wouldn't matter if it were Bantu or C++, it would be translated and approximated. It would not, could not, capture the same meaning. It would be silly to even try to recreate the experience of hearing Op. 132, in words, or pictures, or anything else.

The meaning can only be captured by a human, through response, and cannot be translated into any other form. Music, it seems, is human response to sound. The meanings of the sounds of music, in other words, are our response to the sounds.

This creates a problem though. What if not everyone responds the same way? Does music mean something different to everyone?

Well, undoubtedly there is some difference, but the evidence points to it being rather small. In people with similar musical backgrounds, meaning those who have largely listened to the same types of music, the soundtrack for a particular movie seems equally suited to the film. The moods, energies, and expectations generated are universal enough that music can be crafted

to match, or to be an ironic mismatch. Our responses are completely subjective, ours alone, and yet for those of us with similar musical backgrounds they are somehow shared.

I suppose we're more alike than we'd often like to think.

So, our perfect machine needs to be human and share our musical background. It needs to have heard (perfectly) and responded (humanly) to all of the music in our shared musical world — an infinite number of times, I suppose.

With this background of information, our perfect machine would then hear music in astounding detail and respond fully, humanly, to every detail of the sounds, thereby decoding. Or, it could transform its own suitable human sentiment into sound, using syntax lifted from the full store of our shared musical background, thereby encoding for our listening pleasure.

What a marvelous machine!

Now, it is very interesting what we come up against now, we thinkers, we philosophers. We've hit the end. The description seems to paint the picture in full, when we think about what it's supposed to do. But where are the fingers? Shouldn't the machine have fingers?

Well, perhaps, but they don't seem to be a part of the crucial mechanism. Actually, it's now difficult to see where the fingers should go. How they would work with this mechanism. Whether the fingers are playing violin or writing note heads, it's not clear what part of the mechanism should be driving them. If meaning must flow perfectly into sound and vice versa, wouldn't the fingers be in the way? An extra step? A perfect machine should have no extra step. Perhaps we need to go back to the basics of language for a few moments to see if we missed something.

Here I notice while speaking that I do indeed use my physical bits while encoding, actually making the sounds. My lips, tongue, jaw, lungs, and vocal chords are all working. I'm certainly doing the stuff, but what's more interesting to me is what I'm finding I don't do. I am not thinking about moving my lips or tongue (actually, I am now and it makes my mouth feel slow and awkward), and in fact, I'm not thinking about the sounds I'm making either. The commands for the physical movements that actually make my language sounds are buried somewhere inside the language itself, somehow. I'm engaged with my thought, with the mental experience I desire to communicate, and both the sounds and physical apparatus seem to follow automatically. The physical actions so perfectly married to the sounds, and sounds so perfectly married to meaning that they have become for me one and the same, but with the meaning leading the way. The meaning, my expressive intent, drawing from a storehouse in my mind of our shared language, matching meaning to patterns of sound, and simultaneously matching those to the actions required for creating the sounds. It never seems to happen the other way around, where I intend a sound first, or intend a physical action, when I'm speaking. It is meaning in my

mind alone, somehow tied in the underground to the corollary sounds and matching actions. It's like my brain was designed to do this.

I'm a genius!

Or not: I'm just normal. Your brain does exactly the same thing.

That second option is, perhaps, more likely, given that I have put on my pants backwards, more than once, just this week.

Okay then, time to update the machine. It seems that our previous model was correct, and even complete on the receiving side, but was missing a single piece on the encoding side. The physical actions required to make the sounds (or write the notes) must be tied unconsciously to those sounds, both together serving the meaning. In the machine, however, we need to assemble these parts correctly. The meaning, or experience, is dominant but perfectly bound to the sounds that express it, while the physical actions required to make those sounds are completely transparent. They are never commanded or even considered, but only follow the conscious and driven sound/meaning amalgam. Like a baby asleep in the pram, or a sidecar on a motorbike.

It would be challenging to construct such a machine. Or not. We all do this when we're speaking our native tongue, maybe not as perfectly as described earlier, but pretty darn well. So perhaps we all have the stuff of a very fine music machine. Maybe the perfect music machine is there for all of us. The extra-talented folks who dominate our musical world must be somehow better utilizing, then, capacities that we all share. They must be using music like we use our native tongues.

These more talented folks, must hear details of music better than the rest of us. They must feel music more strongly and clearly. They must have a larger storehouse of music they've heard better and felt more strongly. They must have the physical actions part better restricted to ride-along only.

Some of that we can do! We can listen to more music, and listen to it carefully with sensitivity. But what about the rest of it?

We can do all of it, but since we didn't think to try it that way initially, or perhaps were told differently, we'll have to change how we approach music. We must learn to listen better, seeking to hear every detail of sound. We must cultivate and nurture our responses to the sounds of music. We must ordain the physical actions of playing to unconscious servitude, transparent and released from direct command.
We can do these things. Clearly we can. So, if we can do those things maybe each of us has plenty of talent. Maybe we just have to learn how to correctly use the machine.

Okay…

Clearly, this little essay has traveled a twisted route, passing through terrain interesting, varied, and treacherous. Several obstacles were avoided through clever detour and many a fearful drop was conquered with averted gaze. However, should I have endeavored to face every foe in one battle, my defeat would have been assured. Please pardon, therefore, my apparent cowardice and consider me as one who must contend with challenges singly. And stay tuned.